

DOWN & DIRTY DV: 7 Ways to Work a Film Festival

www.DownandDirtyDV.com

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Okay, you've poured your heart out into making your doc, it's finally finished, and you even got accepted into a few festivals. So, now it's time to sit back and let the accolades, awards, and applause roll in, right? Wrong! Now it's time to hustle just as hard as you did for all the other steps of the filmmaking process to make sure that people know about, see, and report about your film. Here's an overview of how to get the most out of a festival experience:

1

Do Your Homework

Any information that you can gather could give you an edge over the competition or at least keep you from putting your foot in your mouth. So find out as much as you can about the particular festival you are attending. Read and print out all the info on their website. Look it up in the festival guides. Talk to past attendees and filmmakers. Try to figure out what films did well there and why. Find out what the audience responded to in the past. Research the programmers' tastes and goals.

2

Apply Early

Filmmakers are notorious procrastinators. However, this often isn't because we're irresponsible. It's because we're perfectionists and the guerrilla filmmaking process is such that things always seem to be twice as hard and take twice as long as we anticipated. However, with film festivals, procrastination is an ill-advised practice.

As someone who's organized a few festivals, I can tell you that the vast majority of entries come in during the last few days before the entry deadline. If your project is lumped in with all the rest of the last minute entries, it has less of a chance of standing out from the crowd. Weary festival organizers and screeners are more tempted to hit the fast forward or eject button at the first sign of flaws or boredom. So I strongly advise submitting your project several weeks before any deadline while the judges are still fresh and not glazed over from hours of viewing bad movies.

A more recent and revolutionary service for film festival applicants is withoutabox.com. This website allows filmmakers to streamline the festival submission process by filling out and submitting one universal festival application and digital press kit to multiple film fests at once. According to their website, at last count there were more than 2000 participating film fests including many of the major festivals. This service is increasingly being embraced by the indie community, since it makes life easier for the festival and the filmmakers.



Withoutabox.com simplifies the festival application process.

3**Put Together a Guerrilla Festival Team**

You can not adequately promote your project all by yourself at a film festival. You need to enlist the help of your producers, crew members, friends and family to help assemble promo materials then hit the festival streets and hang posters, hand out flyers, drum up press and interviews, pull wacky publicity stunts, and otherwise talk up, hype, and push your project. This is a great opportunity to bring your core filmmaking team back together for a celebratory reunion and one last hustle. If at all possible, try to bring the main subject(s) of your documentary. Audience and press are much more attracted to doc screenings where the actual subjects will be present and accessible. Inspiring or colorful subjects of well-received docs can become instant festival celebrities and easily double your promotion without even trying.

4**Put Together a Hot Press Kit and Promo Materials**

There's crazy competition for eyeballs and attention at any film festival. Your posters, promotional materials, and trailer are the most important tools for luring audience members and reporters to your film. It helps if you have a decent budget, but creativity can help make up the difference. You'll need postcards, posters, a press release, video trailers, giveaways, production photos, and more. Originality, creativity, and grabbing attention counts more than your budget. You can do many ingenious things with paper alone. To take your guerrilla promotions to the next level, enlist some friends with advertising, design, or art backgrounds to come up with something that is cheap, clever, and most importantly- *memorable*.

5**Get Your Hustle On**

If you are a filmmaker with a film in a festival, you can not afford to be shy. You have to hustle to get butts in seats. You've gotta get out there, meet the festival attendees, and hype your film. Don't be a raving lunatic, but let anyone who will listen know about your film and when it's playing. A good natured publicity stunt doesn't hurt either. The goal is to pack your screening to capacity and hopefully sell-out. Get as many people handing out flyers as possible. Entertainment people hate to be out of the loop. If there's a buzz, people want to know what it's about. Even if they don't actually see your project, the mere buzz created by full screenings, people discussing the project and looking at your clever handouts will create a positive impression in their heads... "If people are talking about it, it must be good."

6**Mix at the Parties and Panels**

The panels and parties are where people are most approachable and sociable. While many corporate business deals begin on the golf course, many film deals begin with a casual conversation over cocktails or at industry events. If you aren't likable, engaging and pleasant to be around socially, who's seriously going to entertain the notion of entangling themselves with you in deals or projects that play out over months or even years? Oscar-nominated director, Adrian Belic of *Ghengis Blues* fame, summed it up best when he said, "Until people see your film, all they see is *you*." Given a choice, anyone would choose to work long-term with someone they enjoy being around rather than those they don't, so go to the parties and attend some filmmaking panels and let people know who you are and what you do. Filmmaking opportunities and alliances often *start* with a simple social conversation. So get out to those festival events and mix and mingle, even if it hurts.



The podcasting panel at Sundance.

7**Don't Just Network, Follow Up**

Don't make the mistake of thinking that the only thing to be gained at a film festival is distribution and publicity. The cold truth is that a distribution deal is a long shot for most films at any festival, but it's far from the only prize. A single chance (or orchestrated) meeting could hold the key to your filmmaking future. Know this: networking *is* the film and tv industry. Don't be intimidated by the word "networking." All it really means is meeting and connecting with people in your industry and trading info and resources. It's getting out there and *putting* yourself out there. The goal of networking is not to see how many people you can pitch your project to or hit up for favors. Networking is a two-way street. It's as much about what you can give as what you get. Lasting relationships are based on mutual giving whether it's trading advice, information, services, or connecting someone with one of your contacts. (Notice I didn't distinguish between "business" and "personal" relationships... The rules are one in the same.) If you genuinely connect and look to help other people, the rest will follow. If you are willing to help people, people will be willing to help you. People in this business can easily tell when you are desperate or just want to get something from them and it's a major turn off. Once you connect and you have a card, email address or phone number, you should follow up within two weeks tops. A short email to say hello, point to an article, update them on your project, or asking what's going on with their project is sufficient. If you can meet up in person for lunch or coffee it's all the better. Once there's a human connection you will have another ally to help you achieve your filmmaking goals.